

G. W. F. Hegel's Understanding of the Absolute: A Non-metaphysical Interpretation

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Abstract

G. W. F. Hegel is usually regarded as a/the metaphysician *par excellence*. However, his thought is multi-faceted and its overarching metaphysical scheme can be viewed as self-deconstructive and containing many elements that represent a non-metaphysical philosophical-epistemological stance. This paper will explore the possibilities of self-overcoming of Hegel's metaphysics with reference to his understanding of the concept of the absolute as expounded in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, especially the Preface. The paper is composed of two main sections from the ontological and epistemological perspectives respectively. The first section deals with Hegel's groundbreaking understanding of the absolute within the philosophical context of his time, explicating his agreements and disagreements with Spinoza, Kant's critical philosophy and the post-Kantian philosophy of identity, represented by Fichte and Schelling, and, above all, highlighting Hegel's own innovations, coming to grips with the intricacies of his thought. The section argues for a trans-immanent (J.-L. Nancy's neologism) conception of the absolute in the *Phenomenology*, which means an absolute, opening up from and remaining within the very limits of human reason and worldly immanence, generating itself *ad infinitum* within its own finite limits. The second section, in turn, suggests a non-metaphysical way of understanding the knowledge of the absolute proposed by Hegel. His epistemological polemics with the Romantics is also considered, after that, disclosing self-deconstructive elements in Hegel's system, in fact offering a gallery of images of fake, perspectival, relative "absolutes".

1 Introduction

From the very outset, I must concede that this paper may be deficient because, although being a teacher of philosophy of religion, I am not a proper scholar of Hegel. That is, I am not quite familiar with his entire philosophical system, the current state of Hegel research in the world, and have to rely heavily on secondary sources. Nevertheless, when receiving a call for papers for the conference *Metamorphoses of the Absolute*, I felt compelled to choose Hegel from the whole range of philosophers – e.g., Fichte, Schelling, Bradley, Royce, Findlay et al. – who have reflected on this subject, perhaps in particular because of the ambiguity of Hegel's thought, which allows for multi-faceted interpretations, including such interpretations that are conformable with today's non-metaphysical, deconstructive moods on the philosophical scene.

Moving to the topic and starting with terminology, the term "absolute" derives from the Latin *absolutus*, which in the ordinary Latin language means loosened, released, detached, and as such thereby also complete (cf. Inwood, 27). *Absolutus* is the past

participle of *absolvere* – to loosen from, detach, complete respectively. Thus the absolute as detached etc. accordingly means something not dependent on, not conditional on, not relative to or restricted by anything else. As complete, the absolute also means something self-contained, perfect and the like. Of course, a metaphysical association also comes with this understanding – the absolute as something detached in the sense of being detached from reality. The absolute as a noun has been used for quite a long time, especially in the Middle Ages: for example, in Nicholas Cusanus's *De docta ignorantia* (1440), referring to God. German philosophers after Kant – which is Hegel's context – commonly used *das Absolute* to refer to the ultimate, unconditioned reality.

Hegel is usually regarded as the metaphysician *par excellence*. After all, the main task of philosophy, for him, is a rational knowledge of the absolute (quote referred to in Beiser, 4). This understanding of philosophy conforms to the definition of metaphysics. Kant, for example, in the *Critique of Pure Reason* sets the standard for understanding metaphysics in this sense, namely, as the striving to know the unconditioned through pure reason.

However, whether Hegel can be considered as a metaphysician in this classical sense depends on several factors, such as

- How we understand metaphysics,
- How Hegel understands the absolute,
- How we interpret Hegel.

In this paper, I will explore the possibilities of Hegel's overcoming the abovementioned kind of metaphysics by reinterpreting the absolute in a more non-metaphysical way during his earlier, formative Jena period, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and its Preface – when Hegel himself has not yet become the orthodox, official philosopher of the Prussian State. At the very least, as I see it, with Hegel, the concept of the absolute undergoes a decisive metamorphosis in the history of philosophy – the absolute becoming dispersed in the actual world.

Representatives of different philosophical positions have very differently interpreted Hegel, who is notorious for the obscurity and complexity of his texts. I should note that a non-metaphysical interpretation of Hegel, of course, will be more in line with the legacy of the “left wing” than with the “right wing” Hegelians – if I may here refer to these two conflicting immediate neo-Hegelian perceptions as representative of how Hegel's thinking can be approached. I also am predisposed to the interpretations that radically atheologise Hegel. In any case, a great thinker like him does not have to be consistent. Inconsistency is much richer in novel possibilities – especially today, as we approach philosophical texts through deconstructive strategies, looking for self-deconstructive, heterogeneous elements within the systems of thought.

At this point I would like to conclude the introductory remarks and move on to the descriptive, analytical part of this paper, consisting of two main sections, one of which is somewhat ontological, another somewhat epistemological. The first section will deal with Hegel's groundbreaking understanding of the absolute within the philosophical context of his time, while the second section will suggest a non-metaphysical way of understanding the “absolute knowing” proposed by Hegel.

2 Hegel's Conception of the Absolute within the Philosophical Context of His Time

In the *Phenomenology*, there are implicit discussions regarding the absolute with Hegel's post-Kantian contemporaries, such as Schelling, Fichte and the Romantics. While Hegel himself does not explicitly define the absolute, his former ally Schelling does. For him, the absolute is that which is not dependent on anything else in order to exist or be conceived and also which is without qualification, undivided (see Beiser, 4). The historical antecedent of this concept for both Schelling and Hegel is Spinoza's similar definition of substance (referred to in Beiser, 4). Schelling, following Spinoza, calls the absolute "the infinite substance" or "the in-itself" (*das An-sich*). Moreover, both Schelling and Hegel, just like Spinoza, identify this absolute substance with the universe as a whole. Since the universe contains everything there is, there is nothing outside it for it to depend on. For anything less, there will be something outside it in relation to which it must be conceived (Beiser, 4). Already this Spinozistic understanding of the absolute is a kind of overcoming metaphysics understood as speculation about some transcendent entities, such as God, Providence, the soul etc., as this conception does not deal with the absolute as an entity, even if the highest one, but instead deals with the whole of which all entities are only a part (cf. Beiser, 5).

Of course, neither Schelling, nor Hegel remained content with Spinoza's system. Before Schelling, his former master Fichte, struggling with the problem of knowledge, has proposed the principle of identity between the subject and the object, the knower and the known. The paradigmatic instance of such knowledge being actualised is self-knowledge, whereby the subject-object identity becomes the "absolute ego", comprising all reality and creating its objects in the act of knowing – a kind of divine *intellectus archetypus*, though conceived as being no more than a regulative principle à la Kant (see Beiser, 12ff).

On this basis, Schelling developed a conception of the absolute as a neutral identity underlying both the subject (mind) and the object (nature) (see Inwood, 27). Although this conception may superficially appear as Spinozistic and Fichtean inasmuch as it treats the metaphysical contrasts of the subjective and objective as the attributes of a single substance, it radically differs from these former thinkers by defining this substance in vitalistic, teleological terms, as a living, primal force, manifesting in a hierarchical order from minerals and plants to human self-consciousness. In this new understanding, the absolute is conceived as an organism, a self-generating and self-organising whole. Schelling also saw this conception as more consistent with the latest scientific developments (see Beiser, 5f).

In the Preface to the *Phenomenology* Hegel takes over this organic and dynamic conception of the absolute, at the same time criticising and overcoming it. In Hegel's opinion, in the Fichtean-Schellingian absolute as the subject-object identity, its finite modes have been subsumed in a kind of solipsistic subjectivity. As a result, the realm of the finite and appearance still remains excluded from such an absolute. Even if

everything has been subject to the absolute idea, a closer look reveals not the same principle having spontaneously assumed different shapes (which will be Hegel's own proposal), but rather an "abstract universality", "monochromatic formalism" (Hegel, 9) – "shapeless repetition of one and the same formula, only externally applied to diverse materials, thereby obtaining merely a boring show of diversity" (Hegel, 8).

Also in this case, the absolute, contrary to its definition, becomes dependent, that is, becomes conceivable only in contrast to something it is not, namely, the apparent and the finite (Beiser, 7). Accordingly, Hegel is compelled to correct Schelling's limited formulation of the absolute that excludes the modes which determine the specific characteristics of entities, hurling them "all into the abyss of vacuity without further development or any justification" (Hegel, 9). Dealing with something from the perspective of such an absolute consists merely in declaring that although the absolute has just been referred to as something definite, yet, in this absolute, as expressed by the Leibnizian-Fichtean-Schellingian idealist identity formula $A=A$, "there is nothing of the kind for there all is one" (Hegel, 9). Then Hegel proceeds with his well-known metaphorical utterance: such an absolute is nothing but a "night in which, as the saying goes, all cows are black..." (Hegel, 9)

Hegel does not limit himself to adding a propaedeutic to the absolute of the philosophers of identity; instead, he modifies the very conceptions of the absolute and its knowing (Hyppolite, 7). Hegel maintains that the absolute, as the Schellingian living substance, can be the subject or actual only in so far as it is the movement of positing itself, or is the mediation of its self-othering with itself, or pure, simple negativity, for this very reason at the same time being the bifurcation of the simple (Hegel, 10). Only through this dialectical process, through the doubling of the opposition and the subsequent negation of the indifferent diversity and the immediate simplicity as its antithesis, only through this self-restoring sameness or this reflection in otherness within itself – not an original or immediate unity as such – is the true absolute reached (Hegel, 10). Only the whole process of the substance consummating itself through its own development is true, whereas of the absolute, as Hegel proceeds, "it must be said that it is essentially a *result*, that only in the *end* is it what it truly is; and that precisely in this consists its nature, viz. to be actual, subject, the spontaneous becoming of itself" (Hegel, 11).

The absolute thus requires mediation, as at first immediately enunciated, it is only the universal, since such words as "the divine", "the eternal", "the absolute" by themselves do not express what is contained in them. To make them meaningful, at least a proposition is required. The proposition, in turn, contains a becoming-other, which has to be taken back, or is a mediation. There can be no knowledge which is not mediated, including the knowledge of the absolute. The philosophy of identity rejects such mediation with horror, as if absolute cognition were surrendered when more is made of mediation than in simply saying that it is nothing absolute and is completely absent in the absolute (Hegel, 11; see also Lauer, 309). In Hegel's view, such abhorrence stems from ignorance of the nature of mediation and of absolute cognition itself. Mediation is the aforementioned self-moving selfsameness, the moment of pure negativity of the subject, simple becoming. As such, it must include reflection and reason.

To be sure, in Hegel's view, the absolute, in order to be properly absolute, must be the unity of the infinite and the finite, the substance and the subject; otherwise it would be less than absolute. The absolute by definition must include the substance and its modes, including the subject and all the flux of worldly finitude and appearances (see Beiser, 7). Hence, instead of the Schellingian "vacuity of the night", for Hegel the absolute is the dynamic world in a never-ending, serendipitous development process, in which the appearance itself "is the arising and passing away that does not itself arise and pass away, but is 'in itself', and constitutes the actuality and the movement of the life of truth" (Hegel, 27). Hegel describes this process with another metaphor – the "Bacchanalian revel in which no member [i.e. no element of appearance] is not drunk", here or there dropping in for the feast or out for repose (Hegel, 27).

Noteworthy, this understanding of the absolute is exempt from Kant's critique of metaphysics, the main target of which was the metaphysics of the Leibnizian-Wolffian school, which conceived of the absolute in deistic terms as a supernatural entity beyond the realm of nature. Hegel and Schelling agree with Kant that metaphysics in this sense is impossible, only the diagnosis of the impossibility is different. Such a metaphysics is impossible not because the supernatural is unknowable, as Kant thought, but because it does not exist at all. If the absolute is conceived in sheerly naturalistic terms, then metaphysics does not require the transcendent, noumenal knowledge, condemned by Kant. All there is to know, is nature herself, the nature, which is given in experience (Beiser, 8).

Importantly, Hegel in this way also proposes a solution to the Kantian bifurcation of the subject. Kant's problem in the "Transcendental Deduction" of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is: How is empirical knowledge possible if it depends on universal principles that themselves cannot be verified in experience? Universal *a priori* concepts provide the form of experience, whereas particular *a posteriori* intuitions or impressions furnish the matter of experience. However, this scheme ends up in a dualism similar to Descartes's dualism of mind and body. In Kant's case, there appears to be a loss of any relation between concepts and perceptions, between understanding and sensibility. Kant's own solution was to identify the absolute with the *a priori* concepts that apply to experience as its necessary transcendental conditions – space, time and the categories. This solution remained unsatisfactory for Hegel (Beiser, 10f). In Hegel's perspective, Kant himself, with his insistence on the noumena, things-in-themselves beyond experience and knowledge, remains caught up in the traditional metaphysics. Hegel himself wants to purge any vestiges of the metaphysical world behind the real one (Solomon, 8). In Hegel's corrected Schellingian conception, the subject and the object are just different degrees of organisation and development of the absolute in its manifestation in nature, and the dualism is thus overcome.

Hegel sees as what is absolute in nothing which lies beyond the experiences and activities of human beings; the absolute is what is entirely present (*das durchaus Gegenwärtige*), what is on hand and actual, not what is over and behind (*drüben und hinten*), not what is realised in a supramundane consciousness, nor in a timeless, comprehensive vision

(Findlay, 20). Likewise, mention may be made that in no case can Hegel's absolute be endowed with any religiously-spiritual or mystical connotation. There is no place for any kind of "mysticism" in his system, except perhaps for what Fackenheim calls "a mysticism of reason", which is no flight from the actual world, taking it as mere sham and illusion. Instead, according to Hegel's thinking, such a flight itself would be a sham compared to the actual world which, even if ultimately fragmented, has substance and reality. "The Absolute, if accessible to thought at all, is accessible only to a thought which *remains with* the world of sense, not to a thought which shuns it in 'monkish fashion'" (Fackenheim, 79f). The subject matter of the *Phenomenology*, the Spirit (*Geist*) itself, is thus more of a world-spirit (*Weltgeist*), "an all-embracing, secular, historical, concept-using entity, realizing itself through time and human events, and, especially, through the thinking of philosophers" (Solomon, 252). It is the human, worldly spirit.

To conclude this section, I would like to point out that if Hegel's early system of the *Phenomenology* can be deemed as metaphysics at all, it is no more than a kind of "metaphysics" of the "hither side of being", not of the beyond of the subject and the world. To step outside the times of Hegel and make associations with contemporary philosophy, the first figure coming to my mind is Jean-Luc Nancy. I think that in broad lines Hegel's absolute can be inscribed within Nancy's concept of the "trans-immanence" of the world, which means something like an absolute, opening up from and remaining within the very limits of human reason and worldly immanence, generating itself *ad infinitum* within its own finite limits. When the "beyond of the world has been dissipated, the out-of-place instance of sense opens itself up *within* the world" (Nancy, 55). So, the sense of the absolute ultimately belongs to the structure of the world, hollowing out therein its own "transimmanence" – designating the transcendence of the very immanence of the world, or simply – its existence and exposition (Nancy, 55). This can be said about Hegel's absolute as well, and that is the meaning of Hegel's "speculative Good Friday", "the Calvary of absolute Spirit" in the last sentences of the *Phenomenology*. The dissipation of the absolute.

3 Knowledge of Hegel's Absolutely Relative "Absolute"

The argumentation in the previous section is inseparable from epistemological issues, which will be the subject matter of this section. Just as the absolute had to comprise the phenomenal world, the absolute cannot be what it is if it does not include the knowledge of the absolute and its manifestation in the phenomenal world as well as the knowledge of the relationship between the former and the latter (see Inwood, 27). The absolute in its original, metaphysical sense (e.g., in a proposition "the absolute is the substance") is superfluous, as it does not have a subject term conceivable apart from the concept applied to the subject term. So, the absolute in this sense could be omitted altogether, instead concentrating only on the concepts that apply to the phenomenal world (such as "substance") and to the subject, as well as on what constitutes the essence of the phenomenal world and of the subject insofar as neither of these is conceivable without such concepts applied by the subject (cf. Inwood, 28).

So, on this account, the absolute can be understood not as the Schellingian neutral identity underlying the subject and object, but as the conceptual system embedded in the manifestation of the absolute in the phenomenal world and the subject alike. Since this conceptual system is not static but develops, manifesting itself in successively higher levels of nature, in the advancement of human knowledge over history etc., the absolute is then not static, but always developing – up to the philosophy of Hegel himself (Inwood, 28). In any case, the absolute is thus inextricably linked with the knowable reality. The absolute becomes the world of experience itself and, accordingly, can itself be known and, notably, contra Kant, can be known as it is in-itself, inasmuch as there is nothing beyond (which is not to say that the absolute could not be known otherwise or differently – Solomon, 301).

Furthermore, speaking of Hegel's epistemology of the absolute, it is important to mention his polemics with the Romantics – Schlegel, Jacobi, Novalis, Hölderlin, the young Schleiermacher and others. For the Romantics, the absolute was a poetic image, a metaphor for a great cosmic harmony and the poet's being at one with the universe.

In a certain agreement with Kant, who assigned the absolute the status of a regulative idea which cannot be known constitutively, the Romantics also held that the absolute cannot be known – as the conceptual means of language are rather limited for its magnificence. At the same time, the Romantics believed that a human being can come into contact with the absolute differently: directly through intuition, feeling or faith, for example.

Hegel's contention is that reason is capable of knowing the absolute, and he contrasts his own philosophy, which attains the absolute through concept (*Begriff*), with those who insist that the absolute is not supposed to be comprehended (*begriffen*), but is instead to be felt and intuited (*geföhlt und angeschaut*) through feeling and intuition (*Geföhhl und Anschauung*) (Hegel, 4). Hegel considers these other means of awareness of the absolute as lower forms of consciousness compared to reason and argues that the absolute can be truly grasped only through the concept. As reality as such also includes consciousness, "the absolute knowledge" must also include knowing that, in one respect, reality is determined by consciousness, through concepts. Truth in this scheme is the conceptual activity through which we conceive the world together with our awareness that these concepts determine the world. As there is no reality beyond experience, truth is experience conceived through the concept (Solomon, 265). Thus, the "absolute" functions epistemologically as a kind of bridge between consciousness and reality.

Yet – and this will be the deconstructive contention of this paper – Hegel's own arguments seem to undermine the conceptual "absolute knowledge". To recall, Hegel knows perfectly well that concepts are always mediating, contingent upon language, culture etc., and he constructs his system of *Phenomenology* accordingly (Solomon 189). If deprived from these contexts, concepts become pure, empty abstractions – "the black cows in the night". Just as the word "God", the religious counterpart of the philosophical absolute, is by itself "a meaningless sound, a mere name" if not posited as subject, to which, again, the predicates are affixed by a movement belonging to the knower of this

subject, not belonging to the subject's fixed point. The subject can be fixed only in anticipation, whereas the actuality is self-movement (Hegel, 12f).

From this perspective, the *Phenomenology* may be understood as conjuring up before our eyes "a gallery of images" (Hegel, 492) of various forms of this "absolute", manifesting through human experience in time and space. The only "absolute unity" of the world, forms of consciousness (*Gestalten des Bewusstseins*) etc. in this case can only be – the unity of infinite diversity. In fact, I would say that, in this sense, Hegel's "absolute" is not even the absolute but a fake, a simulacrum, the same aforementioned mere name, empty word. Accordingly, the *Phenomenology* can be viewed not as a treatise in metaphysics but, say, in conceptual anthropology (Solomon 27), history of ideas and the like. The absolute truth can never be reached, as it is always in a never-ending process of conceptual construction and development. As such, it can never be any particular insight or knowing. There is no absolute viewpoint that encompasses all the others. There are just indefinitely many more viewpoints (Solomon 301) – some of which are laid out and fixed in the *Phenomenology*.

Given these conditions, the "absolute knowledge" dealt with in the last chapter of the *Phenomenology* may pertain not so much to a view of reality itself than to a view about views (Solomon 192). The "absolute knowledge" inevitably entails the comprehension of reality through the totality of different conceptions, viewpoints that may be compatible only if taken up as a whole on some presumably "absolute" level (Solomon 192). Ultimately, what one has in the "absolute knowledge" is a kind of a bird's eye view – with the bird being the "owl of Minerva" – on a multitude of views, among which none is "the" single, correct, absolute one, even if it may appear such from a particular perspective. The "absolute" then becomes a safeguard against the pluralism of "objective truths" – even though contradiction, even paradox, is a *conditio sine qua non* for Hegel-the-dialectician, and, as in his system, is an indicator of the richness of possibilities. For the world in itself is contradictory – which only philosophy through reason's "absolute knowing" can reconcile. Only keeping in mind that the "absolute" of Hegel ultimately appears all too relative – indeed, "a relative absolute" (Solomon 196).

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